

Carol Stringari Installations and problems of preservation*

Installation art and its preservation is a burgeoning field of interest with many contradictions and ambiguities. Thus far no clear methodology for the care and long-term existence of installation art has been established. Issues of documentation, re-interpretation, material condition, artist's intent, and criteria for preservation are not defined and often defy conventional conservation ethics. The material nature may not be the essential part of the work in relation to its conceptual nature, but we must acknowledge the physical object in order to address future questions regarding the state of preservation, obsolescence of technology and materials.

Discussion of installation art is predicated on the notion that we understand the concept of installation, and this in itself can be problematic. The word is often used as an umbrella term for many genres which are not, in fact, considered installations by the creator.

In his Dictionary of the *Avant-Gardes*¹, Richard Kostelantz describes installations as "art made for a particular space, which need not be a gallery. Such art theoretically exploits certain qualities of that space, which it will inhabit forever or be destroyed when the exhibition is terminated".

For purposes of this paper, installations will be defined as any site-specific work which may or may not be destroyed after being exhibited. Installation art is a hybrid art form that may include architecture, various media, performance and technology.

Misconceptions

Interdisciplinary study and serious attempts to document and understand an art work within its original context are essential in order to avoid misinterpretations in the future. To date, we have not been sufficiently aware of potential problems to be faced by curators, registrars, and conservators when the works are reassessed within a new and often incompatible context. Without proper documentation, one may encounter a subjective discourse between individuals who were not present when the work was conceived. That can lead to disaster for the 'essence' of the work.

In some cases the artist may be available, but may not care or wish to dredge up old ideas. Artists may even wish to re-invent the piece – which is perfectly understandable from their perspective, but what about our responsibility as caretakers of historical objects?

There are several ways in which installations may depart from rigid notions of preservation and traditional approaches towards the care of collections:

- Materials may no longer be available, or technology is obsolete for recreating the work.
- The art work itself may not exist anymore or may never have materialised (except on paper).
- The artist may be alive and wish to 're-conceive' the work.
- The conservator may be asked to replace materials or find creative solutions for preserving ephemeral materials.
- In many cases, an installation is a response to a particular space and possibly a particular moment in history; without this context, the work may become void of meaning or substance.

Curators, conservators or technicians interpreting plans for the work or refabricating it will vary widely in sensibility, which makes this process highly subjective. Unfortunately, time and money restrictions also hinder the successful completion of an installation or refabrication of a work.

Obviously, all of this will be more complicated when the artist is deceased and an installation is being recreated. Many things then become speculation. Often there are misinformed and sometimes arrogant decisions made to interpret the work of an artist, without regard to original intent: history is easily rewritten and works can be completely misunderstood. If we have any ability to ward this off, we should certainly strive to do so. It is our collective responsibility, as museum professionals, to preserve both the material nature and the conceptual nature of the art works in our care.

Questions of temporality

Many installation works are not actually conceived in their entirety in advance but rely quite heavily on circumstances during the process. Artists often work directly and spontaneously on a work at the time of installation, allowing it to develop in response to a particular space or letting it evolve during its creation. Some artists are better than others at pre-conception. This can sometimes result in a work being unresolved or less than 'perfect' for an exhibition. If the work is purchased out of an exhibition, it is then frozen in this state – defined as an historical moment. The ambiguity of the artist may be reflected when the institution who purchased the piece attempts to contact the artist during a reinstallation and the artist wishes to conceive the work differently. This is not necessarily a problem, but if one of the museum's goals is to preserve the integrity of the work it owns the question arises: can such works be mutable, or will each new conception be a new acquisition? What exactly, then, is being purchased when a museum acquires an installation?^{2, 3}

The conservators' role at the time of acquisition is to apply their knowledge of materials in order to fully document the installation. They should be able to anticipate certain materials issues and technological requirements having an impact on the life span of the work.

Many problems regarding the care of these art works are not yet resolved or may even be irresolvable. But hopefully raising the issues will assist other museums in understanding and interpreting their own works of a similar nature. The need for communicating experience and information is obvious, since many of us are confronted with exactly the same problems and are responding to them quite differently. If some form of network or exchange could be set up to record experiences with different artists' work, it may save much unnecessary reinvention of the wheel. It would be useful to have an accessible record of curators and conservators who have had particular experiences with specific artists – as often occurs during the staging of an exhibition, when they may well be exposed to an overall sense of how an artist thinks and works. This might also save the artists from fielding phone calls by conservators who tend to ask the same questions repeatedly. A way to retain the information might be to include a short essay in exhibition catalogues on the artist's intent and the long-term preservation of the work (if applicable).

Food for thought: some examples

One of the earliest examples of installation art I traced was an intervention in the exhibition 'First Papers of Surrealism' in New York, held at the Whitelaw Reid mansion at 451 Madison Avenue in 1942. André Breton was the organiser of this exhibition, for the benefit of the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies. Breton asked Marcel Duchamp to come up with a provocative installation. Duchamp purchased 16 miles of string and proceeded to create a huge spider's web throughout the exhibition space. This intervention, which made it very difficult to view some of the works, is cited as a metaphor for the prevalent opinion that the work of Surrealists was obscure and difficult to read.

In addition to the string installation, Duchamp also created a 'happening' way before its time. He employed a group of youngsters dressed in athletic gear to play around and within the web. They were told to respond to any objections that "Mr Duchamp told us we could play here".⁴ This was a truly radical event at the time, and Duchamp did not even show up for it.

I do not believe such an 'installation' was ever meant to be preserved. There is photographic documentation and it is recorded in historical texts. It may be that one day some curator decides to recreate it, but then it will not be a work of art – only an historical depiction. As far as I know the string no longer exists. Today, in our anxious attempt to preserve materials and record every event or creation, we would probably save something like this.

It is a famous example, but undoubtedly there are numerous works of this kind throughout the twentieth century which could be categorised as installations and are now lost completely. Attempting to preserve every such work may be beyond the requisite responsibility of historians or conservators, falling into the fetish collection category. It can be very difficult, however, to distinguish between preservation and fetishisation when the inherent nature of institutions is to memorialise

and sanctify – not to mention that conservators may feel quite threatened by the notion of an art work having no material substance.

Not all cases are so extreme, however, and the nuances of the discussion can be quite interesting.

In memory of the earthquake victims of Mezzogiorno and in solidarity with the left-wing political party Lotta Continua, Joseph Beuys conceived *Terremoto* during a political discussion in 1981 when he was in Rome (Palazzo Braschi). The installation includes a linotype press which had been thrown away by Lotta Continua; manifestos from this political party were placed on the machine, advertising the Third Way – which opposed the official, existing social systems of Marxism and its opposite, capitalism. The Italian flag was wrapped in felt, wax was poured onto the keyboard, and there is a rubbish can with fat and lead.

There are also numerous blackboards arranged in the manner of a house of cards. On one of these, diagrams of Jupiter and Saturn constellations are shown. The others reflect Beuys' theory of human expression, depicting human sorrow and a range of emotional facial contortions.

In this sculptural context, Beuys treats the themes of human emotion, mechanical processes, political opposition, alchemical procedures and planetary references. The importance of the work is the experience of its entirety and not so much each element in particular. It is this overall effect which generates a specific reaction from the viewer.

Relationships between elements are precarious, reflected in their unstable positioning. This tenuous arrangement is extreme in the case of the blackboards: they are placed at angles, supporting each other like a stack of cards. Beuys used blackboards during lectures and happenings, and they are often part of his works. Their meanings vary – some are relics of an action or lecture, others have been given a sculptural status.

Although in some cases Beuys did use traditional blackboards, in this instance they are painted chipboard – not slate. They present a preservation challenge due to their fragile surfaces. They are meant to lean directly on the floor and against each other; the images are done in chalk and are very vulnerable. The character of the work does not support the possibility of fixing the chalk. Former attempts to fix these chalkboards (by an unknown hand) were unsuccessful and have left a mottled gloss on the surface. The public, being attracted to them, often attempts to add to the composition by smearing the chalk and writing comments in the dust which builds up on the surface. Removal of the dust presents a challenge because it is not possible to clean the boards thoroughly without disturbing the chalk or creating halos around the image.

How much of the dust can and should be removed? To what extent would this dust be acceptable to the artist and when will it become unrepresentative? For the conservator as caretaker of a museum object, the approach to the preservation of this work is not obvious. Beuys stated: "That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished: processes continue in most of them – chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change."⁵

Our concern for the long term preservation might be an absurdity to Beuys, the artist and creator of transformative works. According to several sources, Beuys's widow feels that it is important to relax and have fun with the work: try to enter into the spirit of the pieces.⁶ Therefore, a relaxed attitude has been adopted about the dust on these blackboards – to remove whatever possible without disturbing the chalk and to preserve the overall 'feeling'.

With time, however, the images may become invisible. Then this attitude will require a re-evaluation. The work of Joseph Beuys needs study before preservation decisions are made; each work is quite complex and may operate under different criteria. The general conclusion with regard to this work is the necessity for understanding the intent of his works, and to find a balance where conservation standards are upheld without getting bogged down in minute details.

James Turrell's works often consist of nothing but a plan or the construction material to create a space, with specific lighting and technical requirements. In *Sky Window* he utilised the window and

what the window framed as integral to the work. Turrell works with the space, creating an environment which speaks profoundly to the viewer or visitor.⁷

The problem here is not that of preserving an object. This installation, set up in the Panza Villa in Varese and now belonging to the Guggenheim Museum, is a site-specific work and will not inhabit any other space. Recently it was deinstalled in order to complete renovations to the villa. The documents were carefully reviewed in order to ensure that it will be reinstalled correctly. When the artist created the work, specific instructions were given as to how the existing space should be modified to enable the creation. A certificate of ownership and Document of Realisation are an essential component of the work.

Although the environment/installation was primarily constructed with new walls, they were most certainly a response to the villa – for example, to the lunette window. Other essential components of the piece are the daylight, especially the direction of the light, and what can be viewed from the window. All of these components would be impossible to recreate in another building or landscape. If the building were destroyed, the work would live on only as documentation.

The artist is very clear in the documentation that certain technical parameters must be followed. He specifies with utmost precision such details as lighting, projectors, wall finish, the height of the floor under the entrance etcetera. He also states that he should be contacted and sign off on any re-creation of the space.

As far as I know, the re-creation of his works after his death has not been addressed – so possibly the work will die with him. This points to the necessity of well structured interviews with the artist, to define the works in the museum's collection and hopefully to document his general philosophy for the continuation of his oeuvre (Guggenheim Museum curators are planning to confront these issues with the artist, but at present they feel that no Turrell work should ever be re-created without his involvement). The outcome of the interviews should contribute to the overall comprehension of the artist's work. Results of such an interview should be accessible to others who encounter similar works and are trying to interpret his work and future documentation. Some important questions for works by Turrell would be:

- How much latitude (if any) is allowed for changes in materials, dimensions, technology?
- Will someone be designated as executor who can sign off on re-creations after his death?
- Is there someone who the artist feels has a profound and accurate understanding of his work?

Città Irreale, Millenovecentoottantanove was conceived for a show at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1989 – created in situ as an immediate, spontaneous response to the space. At the artist's request a number of different materials were collected. The artist then worked with these elements to gradually create the igloos. He began to cut the glass sheets with grand gestures but this method in fact turned out to be impractical, so the art handlers measured them and carefully fitted the broken glass onto the clamps.

The work begins with a very simple structure, the igloo, which Merz transforms during the creative process. It refers to energy, shelter, electrical poles and oppositions. Both its meaning and physical structure are complex and layered. Opposing forces and materials combine to form a precarious architecture, with stable and unstable materials juxtaposed and supporting each other.⁸

An interesting issue pertaining to the work is the existence – or non-existence – of the neon element. Originally, this was a separate work. Two versions of the neon piece were in the exhibition, one owned by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and one owned by a private lender. The neon work from the private lender was used on top of the large igloo at the last minute, being an unpredictable aspect of the creative process. It was an integral part of the installation – which was titled after this element – at the Guggenheim.

The work was acquired by the Guggenheim at the time, but not documented clearly. There was no indication whether this neon element was supposed to be copied or borrowed from the lender every time the work was reinstalled. An attempt was made by the art handling/technical staff to re-create the element, but this was neither successful nor authorised: the artist has suggested that we show the piece without the neon element. Until further decisions are made, this is how the work will be installed.

These issues are not particularly important to the artist, who works in a style contrary to formulaic interpretations and rigid outlines. However, the fact that the museum acquired a work which is incomplete needs to be documented and defined. This raises questions about exactly what is being purchased when an installation is acquired, and what freedom does the owner have when reinstalling it? The materials for this piece have been retained, but it is also unclear to what extent they are replaceable and how close to the original replacements must be. For example, a roughly cut piece of glass may be easily substituted, but should shapes and sizes be specified? If the latex yellows and discolours, should it be replaced? And when will the materials no longer reflect the 'meaning' of the work? Is it preferable to have the elements which were tied and cut by the artist's hand, or doesn't it matter?

The installation *Cry Dragon/Cry Wolf: The Ark of Genghis Khan* by Cai Guo Quang, a contemporary Chinese artist working in New York, was created as a site-specific work in conjunction with the Guggenheim staff for the 1997 Hugo Boss exhibition. Hundreds of sheep skin bladders were used to make five rafts, with alanthus branches, string, and wooden oars. Three Toyota engines are suspended from the ceiling and kept running during the installation.

The skins arrived deflated and mouldy – so they needed to be soaked, cleaned and inflated with a compressor. Also, many areas had to be patched. On the inside the skins were coated with sesame oil, however, which made it difficult to achieve a bond. Several adhesives were tested. The artist brought a very toxic rubber cement type material, with MEK as the solvent, from Japan. This appeared to be the only effective adhesive, although possibly not the most stable or most healthy choice. Epoxy was used to fill areas of gathers which were torn and broken.

Alanthus branches, fairly easy to obtain, were collected from the park service. However, the artist was quite particular about the sticks and their groupings. The branches were brittle and split easily, and the process of tying them into bundles was time-consuming. The Toyota motors were adapted to make them run on electricity instead of the unsafe and expensive gasoline combustion of the originals. The motors require constant maintenance and a barrier or alarm must be used to protect the public from the exposed engines.

The work also raises issues of preservation, materials and their degradation, and changes in scale to accommodate different spaces. We are becoming more aware of the need for proper documentation and since the museum's technical staff carried out the work, a complete file was produced on its material nature and installation requirements. The artist was actively involved in the process. The extensive and complex documentation prepared by various museum departments contains the following:

- A precise numbering system for all elements.
- A diagram and blueprint of the installation with XY coordinates.
- The height of each raft, the curves and the relationship of the piece to the gallery – which the artist expressed as important concerns.
- Photographic documentation (many views) and video tapes.
- A lighting report.
- A maintenance record for the motors, including details on the purchase of extra parts and their storage in a proper environment.
- Design of storage and cost analysis for maintenance, transport and long-term storage.
- Notes on conservation, how to obtain replacement parts, the artist's feelings about the long-term preservation of the work.

Although the artist preferred that the piece was not dismantled, it was impractical and virtually impossible to move and store the work intact.

Complete documentation was easy to gather because the artist is very meticulous and clear about the materials and how he sees the piece. However, the work has been considered for other spaces and the artist is willing to make significant alterations to accommodate smaller rooms.

A scheme for documentation

These few examples present different scenarios, each with its own set of criteria. They reflect a range of potential issues and raise important questions to ponder when confronted with similar works. One common thread linking all of these examples is that careful documentation is the key to the interpretation and decision-making process for the future. Time can blur the most crystal-clear idea. Quite common is the tendency to apply contemporary sensibilities to historical objects; as these works become more planted in the history of art, there will be a tendency towards revisionism and skewed perceptions.

The issues and questions raised by these examples can also be applied to more contemporary works which include electronics or computer generated images. Although each object will have its own concerns, the philosophical basis for discussing the museum's role as caretaker remains the same: how do we best serve the art? This may be by maintaining and storing the materials in their present state, or by transferring images or information to a more stable electronic form, or by deriving a plan for replacement of obsolete technology in conjunction with the artist.⁹ In all cases, accurate information about the intent of the piece is a prerequisite. Working with colleagues in other disciplines – art historians, technicians, registrars, industrial scientists, fabricators – is necessary for a holistic understanding of the pieces and to foresee pitfalls.

Thus, it is essential to set up a scheme for documentation and to produce a thorough document when the original piece is constructed. Every work will have its own requirements, so the outline cannot be too rigid. It should be kept in mind that the inherent nature of creativity defies our obsessive need to categorise and catalogue. Acknowledging this, the following outline can serve as a guide for those of us who have the responsibility for seeing these installation works into the future:

1. Photo-documentation of all stages of the process and, if applicable, video and sound documentation.

2. Complete notes and documentation for the initial development stage.

This is often crucial in the understanding of why certain things were done. Many times compromises are made during installations due to cost factors, time restrictions and limited availability of materials. Knowing the history behind certain decisions makes the reinstallation of a work much easier. Within any institution, it is quite difficult to establish a methodology for recording these decisions. They are often made during informal conversations or during last-minute installations and do not get passed along. The appointment of a documentation coordinator would facilitate this process – he/she keeping up with the work, asking questions about any decisions taken and attempting to understand what the concept is as it unfolds.

3. Coordination between the curator, registrar, conservators, technicians and lighting specialists in order to understand the 'whole' installation.

In this way uninformed and inappropriate decisions can be avoided as much as possible.

4. Solicitation of reports from all participants in the project.

This would include technicians, curatorial representatives, curators, registrars, lighting consultants, electricians, etcetera. These reports would be collected and reviewed by the documentation coordinator, citing all inconsistencies.

5. Central archive to file reports.

Easy access in the event that the piece needs to be refabricated. This reduces the possibility that individual files will be lost and that personnel changes within the institution cause loss of valuable information.

6. Interview with the artist.

It is ideal if the artist can be persuaded to focus on the banal aspect of documentation at some time close to the installation of the original work. In that way artists are able to give an accurate

representation of the process and how they feel about the work. Information acquired in retrospect is often transformed quite dramatically and thus can be difficult to reconcile with the original documentation. The interviews should be done by one designated person who understands the piece and is able to establish a dialogue with the artist. The interviewer should keep it brief and precise, knowing what essential questions should be answered. It is counterproductive to ask the artist repeatedly the same questions or have many people within an institution bothering the artist with these details. Although we may feel it is very important, it is often not the artist's main concern.

7. Presentation of potential pitfalls for the future.

Many artists are reluctant to discuss how they feel about the work being reinterpreted or reinstalled in the future. They often find that the piece is only relevant to the present situation; in such cases the documentation of the piece may be the only necessity. The work then becomes a moment in history, never to be constructed, only read about or viewed in photographs or films. But over time the attitude towards reconstructing the work may change and the artist may become more willing to have works reinstalled in different environments, with different criteria and on a different scale. The initial interviews can be helpful in obtaining information about the importance of elements such as specific materials and what to do if they are not available, and about the parameters for altering a colour, light, measurement, etcetera – depending on the situation at hand. Some artists are very casual about their ideas and enjoy having them transformed by history and circumstance; others are far more tied to their materials. In some cases, the relationships inherent in the piece must be preserved in order to preserve the intent. One must carefully study whether these things are crucial to the essence of the piece or not.

8. Architectural plans and blueprints should be retained and preserved in as much detail as possible.

9. Conservation treatments.

Any treatment of the pieces should be carefully documented, as well as the thought process behind it. When working with living artists, they may supervise repairs or alterations. These decisions may not be in line with conservation standards, therefore it is helpful to have documentation as to why certain materials were chosen; the reason is often as simple as the artist being familiar with a certain product or having it on hand at a crucial moment.

10. Reinstallations.

When a work is reinstalled, there are inevitable grey areas where decisions are made which may not conform to the original specifications, or they may be an interpretation of an unclear document or blueprint. It is extremely helpful to have these decisions documented, since 'mistakes' or 'misinterpretations' are often handed down and become more drastic alterations after several generations.

Obviously this process of documentation takes many hours and personnel to organise, enter data, file data and update records. This is not always possible with-in the hectic pace of a busy institution that is understaffed and working on many projects simultaneously. However, this type of documentation ultimately saves time and money for the institution: the research and preparation for reinstallation does not have to be started anew every time if all documents are in place. Increased understanding of the historical responsibility by museum administrators will allow this to become more routine within institutions.

Beware of the tendency to fetishise – the conservator is at a loss when there is no substance to lay hands on. Although we have a responsibility to document and preserve the art works, it is important not to lose sight of a bigger picture where art exists in a continuum. If a work has been, or is, nebulous, possibly that is the nature of the piece. Documentation at all costs, whether that means harassing the artist and their studio or attempting to preserve the most ridiculous detail which has

no effect on the overall concept, can be detrimental to the process. It can also destroy good working relationships between the artist and the museum professional.

In attempting to create a scheme for understanding this genre of art, I sincerely hope that respect for the creative process and its spontaneity is not lost. The fact that art is not always created in a rational, orderly fashion is fortunate, and we should not lose perspective. The harmonious whole and not each singular element is what constitutes a successful work. When this Gestalt is lacking, it may be necessary to 'retire' the installation. Retirement... another field of study.

1 Richard Kostelanz, *Dictionary of the Avant-Garde*, A Cappella Books and imprint of Chicago Review Press Inc., Chicago, 1993.

2 Jon. Ippolito, 'The Museum of the Future: A Contradiction in Terms?', in: *Artbyte* (New York) volume 1, no. 2, June-July 1998, pp. 18-19.

3 Susan Hapgood, 'Remaking Art History', in: *Art in America*, July 1990, pp. 115-119.

4 Calvin Tompkins, *Duchamp*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1996, pp. 332-333.

5 Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1979.

6 Conversation with conservator for the Beuys estate, Mr. Otto Hubacek, 1997.

7 Craig Adcock, *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1990.

8 Germano Celant, *Mario Merz*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Electra, Milan, 1989.

9 See note 2, where Ippolito proposes a Variable Media Initiative.

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